MANAGEMENT STYLES OF ARAB MANAGERS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IRAQI AND SAUDI ARABIAN MANAGERS

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Abstract

Results of the few empirical studies on the style of Arab managers are conflicting. Some have found this to be mainly authoritarian or paternalistic. Others, however, report that Arab managers generally prefer a consultative style. Both groups of researchers find support for their findings in the traditional Arab-Islamic culture. The style of 160 Iraqi and Saudi Arabian managers is surveyed here using a questionnaire. Results obtained indicate that while these managers prefer their superiors to use a participative or consultative style, they do not think that these styles are appropriate for all situations. In general, they exhibit a flexible attitude in this regard by showing their readiness to shift from one style to another depending on salient factors in their organizational units, subordinate and task environment.

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Due to the paucity of rigorous research on organizational forms and management application and practices in Third-World countries, and in spite of increasing calls for the internationalization of organization and management theory and research, superficial observations, assumptions and untested generalizations make up a substantial proportion of accumulated knowledge on organizations and management in these countries. And although these countries are undergoing a dynamic transformation process in their social, political and economic fields, Western management specialists continue to adhere to these assumptions and generalizations. Surprisingly, this unfortunate oversight on the part of these specialists extends also to oil-rich Arab and Moslem countries of the Middle East whose long-term strategic significance for the national security of Western countries and their economies and businesseshas been repeatedly underlined - a significance which is no less than that of Japan and the rapidly industralizing Southeast Asian countries to which international management researchers are currently directing their attention.

One of the persistent assumptions in international management literature is that managers in developing countries influenced by traditional cultural values usually adopt an authoritarian management style. The validity of this assumption can be challenged not only because insufficient evidence has been advanced so far to support it but also cultural values which have been largely assumed to foster it are changing.

It is also argued here, and in spite of the little interest recently shown by management specialists in this topic, that studying management styles in developing countries has theoretical and practical benefits. At the theoretical level, research results on this topic may significantly contribute to our understanding of management thinking and behavior in developing countries. On the practical side, these results can be instrumentally useful for improving organizational effectiveness since management style is a significant tool for gaining subordinates' commitment and increasing their satisfaction. Also, a better understanding of Arab managers style is essential for multinational companies and international businessmen interested in establishing and maintining mutually profitable transactions with these managers. The objective of this paper is to investigate management styles in two developing Arab countries, namely Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Universal or Culture-bound Management Style

Previous studies on the association between cultural factors and organizational and management variables have been inconclusive. Some researchers reported results supporting the culture-bound hypothesis while others found that organizational and management factors vary independently of culture and other contextual factors.

This controversy began when classical organization theories and principles were assumed to have universal applicability regardless of cultural and environmental diversity, However, resistance encountered by international management experts in attempting to transfer these principles to developing countries

casted serious doubts on the validity of this assumption.

The contraversy is still far from resolved. Results obtained by some researchers (Haire etal. 1983; Ngandhi and Reiman 1972; Hickson etal. 1974; Lincoln etal. 1978; Hickson and McMillan 1981; Miller 1987) indicate that culture has limited or no effect on organization and management. Other researchers (e.g. Hofstede 1981; Hunt 1981) found evidence to the contrary and thus concluded that organization and management theories developed in Western countries are insensitive to cultural differences and can not be successfully applied in other countries.

With regard to Arab countries, most studies on organization and management published in English (Changiz 1978; Badaway 1980; Muna 1980; Ali and Al-Shakhis 1985; Kaynak 1986; Yucett 1986) report that organizational characteristics and management practices are strongly influenced by the indigenous culture. Fewer studies (Ayoubi 1981; Badran and Hinnings 1981) obtained results supporting the culture-free hypothesis.

Management style is one of the few topics which have been researched cross-culturally. Researchers were interested in testing the cross-cultural validity of results found in U.S. organizations (Likert 1967) indicating that a manager's style is a prepotent causal variable which shapes an organization climate and hence its effectiveness and profitability. The participative style usually associated with higher levels of worker satisfaction and productivity in U.S. organizations was found to be generally unsuitable for organizations in developing countries where cultural values favor an authoritarian style. Higher morale and productivity under authoritarian rather than democratic

leadership in Indian organizations led Meade (1967) to conclude that the authoritarian style is more appropriate for Indian managers. Heilbroner (1963) argued that leadership authoritarianism is indeed necessary in developing countries to implement the desired social changes. Recently, Welsh, Luthans and Sommer (1993) reported that participative techniques are unsuitable for managing Russian industrial workers. The culture-management style relationship supported by most research findings is best summarized by Barrett and Bass (1970: 194);

`There are differences among countries in preferred styles of leadership. These differences in leadership style appear to be largely culturally based and at this point in time it would be naive to advocate one model of leadership style as being optimum for all cultural groups. The wide-advocated American model of participative management may not be optimum for all cultures and in fact may be dysfunctional in some. Arab Culture and Management Style.'

Most studies on Arab society and culture are found by Yassin (1983) to be impressionistic and speculative while field surveys and rigorous research constitute only a small proportion of the available literature. The usefulness of these studies is further diminished by ideological and political biases and often opinions are confused with facts.

Most of the studies recognize the Arab language and the Islamic religion as the two principal distinguishing characteristics of Arab culture and society. Although several dialects are spoken in Arab countries, Arabs from different countries and backgrounds can communicate with each other using formal Arabic. Islam is the religion of the majority of Arabs,

and the Islamic `sharia´ or jurispudence governs almost all aspects of the devout Moslem's social, political and economic attitudes and behavior. This led Kaynak (1986) to observe that Arab countries share a number of uniform cultural characteristics constituting a common cultural identiy.

In addition to these common homogenous features, Gardner (1959) finds heterogenous features and hence he characterizes Arab society as being mosaic. Barakat (1983) also labels Arab culture as heterogenous. Arab countries, like other developing nations, are passing through a transitional phase during which commitment to traditional institutions such as the tribe, family and religion weakens and their influence over attitudes and behavior decline. Values, norms and customs adhered to and practiced for centuries are being challenged and displaced by new values dictated by social, economic and political changes. However, the assumption that traditional and modern values will peacefully coexist during the current transitional or `prismatic´ stage has been proven wrong by recent events such as the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the resurgence of fundamentalist movements in several Arab countries. It is interesting to note that although religious and secular nationalist groups in Arab countries differ on many issues, they agree that development must not be sought at the cost of sacrificing cherished values and the loss of religious or national identity.

This pull between modern and traditional values experienced by contemporary Arabs may explain the conflicting findings of the few studies on the style of Arab managers. Some researchers (Al-Salem 1980; Al-Khadra 1980; Abdul Wahab 1982; Leila etal. 1985; Kaynak 1986; Badaway 1980) reported that Arab managers practice

an authoritarian or paternalistic style. Other researchers (Muna 1980; Al-Jafary and Hollingsworth 1983; Ali and Al-Shakis 1985) found this style to be mainly consultative. Both groups of researchers use cultural values to explain their findings (Atiyyah 1992). For example, Kaynak (1986) asserts that traditional values in Arab culture favor an authoritarian style. Undoubtedly, a degree of authoritarianism characterizes social relationships such as these between tribal shaikh and clansmen, husband and wife and father and offspring. Until recently, most Arab countries were autocratically ruled by non-Arabs and most present Arab governments are also autocratic. These autocratic regimes foster submissiveness, obedience and conformity at all bureaucratic levels and in society at large. In Iraq, for example, Atiyyah (1993) reports that serious official interest in the introduction of democratic and participative techniques in public enterprises on experimental basis was short-lived.

On the other hand, Islamic teachings have been interpreted to favor 'shura' or consultation. The faithful are instructed to decide issues which are outside the domain of divine guidance through consultation. This was practiced during the time of the Prophet and early Caliphs but was later abandoned under the hereditory Ommayyad rule (A.D. 661-750). Accordingly, Muna (1980) and Ali and Al-Shakhis (1985) believe that Islam and tribal values encourage consultation which explain the preference of Arab managers in their research samples for the consultative style.

Two criticisms are raised here concerning these results. First, both groups of researchers suggest that Arab managers consistently use only a single style, either authoritarian or

consultative. This is inconsistent with research results obtained elsewhere which indicate that managers actually use more than one style (Bass 1981) Second, both groups of researchers also regard the cultural factor as having a prepotent influence over the manager's choice of style. This viewpoint fails to take into consideration cultural diversity and national differences among Arab countries. It also disregards the potential influence of other relevant personal and situational factors such as the manager's education and experience and characteristics of the subordinates, the organizational unit and the task environment.

Research Objectives

Given the fact that research results on Arab management style are sparse and conflicting, the nature of this study must be exploratory. The principal issue explored here is whether or not Arab managers presented with varying conditions would prefer one style over others. If it is found that Arab managers in the sample generally use the same style irrespective of national, situational and personal variations then the influence of culture, as a residual factor, will be supported. However, if the managers are found to use different styles under different conditions then it can be concluded that contingency or situational thinking determines a manager's choice of style.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

Research data were collected using a questionnaire. Two hundred and thirty questionnaires were distributed to Iraqi and Saudi Arabian managers who were attending training programmes at the Iraqi National Center for Consultancy and Management Development and the Saudi Arabian Institute of Public Administration. One hundred and sixty usable questionnaires were returned. The response rate was 69.57 per cent.

Respondents work as public managers in Iraqi and Saudi Arabian ministries, local governments and municipalities. A majority of them numbering 122 (76.25 per cent) are Iraqis. Twenty four (15.38 per cent) of them are senior managers, 42.31 per cent are middle-level managers and 37.19 per cent are first-line managers. Seventy five (46.87 per cent) of them are between the age of thirty and fifty, 30.63 per cent are under 30 and 20 per cent are over fifty years of age. Almost 64 per cent of them have four years or more of college or university education.

Measurement

The questionnaire used in collecting the research data was administered in Arabic. It consisted of a biographical sheet and 62 questions or items making up eight research scales. Two scales measure the style of the manager's immediate superior which the manager considers to be most or least suitable for performing his

duties, career prospects and general satisfaction. Three scales measure the manager's choice of style under three sets of different conditions within his organizational unit: favorable, unfavorable and ordinary, i.e. neither favorable nor unfavorable. The final three scales measure the manager's preferred style for dealing with different subordinates: unadjusted and low-performance subordinates, well-adjusted and high performers, and average subordinates.

The respondent is instructed to answer each item by choosing one or more of the following management style which he considers to be most suitable for dealing with the case or the situation described in the item:

1.Extreme Authoritarian Style: The manager takes the decision and orders his subordinates to implement it.

2.Mild Authoritarian Style: The manager takes the decision and explains to his subordinates before announcing it.

3.Consultative Style: The manager consults with his subordinates before taking the decision.

4.Participative Style: The manager and his subordinates participate in making the decision.

RESULTS

Results show no significant differences in managers' choice of style across types of organization, managerial rank, education and age. These results shown in Table 1 also indicate that most managers generally prefer their superiors to use the participative style because it is, in their opinion, most advantageous to their performance, career prospects and welfare

within their organizations. This was followed by the consultative and mild authoritarian style respectively. An even greater majority among them indicated that their superior's adoption of the extreme authoritarian style would be detrimental to their interests within their organizations. This style was associated in their minds with negative qualities such as lack of objectivity, aloofness, unreasonable work demands, high propensity to use penalties and general unpleasantness.

Insert Table 1 about here

Turning to managers' choice of style in administering their own organizational units, results show that a substantial proportion of them opted for the participative style when internal or environmental conditions were auspicious. Some of these favorable conditions are high effectiveness, productive manager-subordinate relationships, a competent manager and high qualified subordinates. Relatively large percentages of their responses also indicated the consultative or mild authoritarian style. Under unfavorable conditions, managers exhibited no strong preference for any of the styles and responses were almost evenly distributed among the four styles. Examples of unfavorable conditions are: insufficient manpower resources, limited authority delegated to the manager and difficulties in meeting the unit's objective.

Statistically significant differences were found between Iraqi and Saudi Arabian managers' responses regarding the suitable style for managing an organization under ordinary,

i.e. neither favorable nor unfavorable, conditions. A larger number of Iraqi managers opted for the participative style.

Most Iraqi and Saudi Arabian managers chose the participative style to manage well-adjusted and high-performing subordinates. Over 80 percent of the choices indicated that these managers would either consult or share their decision-making powers with subordinates who are highly qualified, experienced, adjusted or respected by their peers. A slightly lesser majority of the responses indicated the extreme or mild authoritarian style to deal with unadjusted and unproductive subordinates. Significant differences were found between Iraqi and Saudi Arabian managers' choice of style in dealing with 'average' subordinates who have recently joined the organizational unit, hold average qualifications or whose performance is mediocre. While a majority of both groups chose the mild authoritarian or consultative style, a larger proportion of Iraqi managers endorsed the participative style.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results obtained here indicate that Arab managers in the research samples do not consistently favor a participative, consultative or authoritarian style. There is no single managerial style considered 'ideal' by Arab managers. All four different styles are considered suitable under different conditions. Managers surveyed here adopt a flexible attitude regarding the choice of style by exhibiting readiness to shift from one style to another. As such, they use a participative or

consultative style if the situation is favorable or their subordinates are cooperative, highly qualified or productive.

These findings are inconsistent with the single-style hypothesis which conceive of Arab managers as using a single style, either authoritarian or consultative, dictated by cultural influences. Alternatively, it appears that these managers endorse a contingent approach in deciding on the appropriate style.

In their roles as subordinates, most of these managers prefer their superiors to be participative or consultative because superiors who use these styles are more likely to be supportive, fair-minded and show concern for performing tasks as well as the employees' welfare. At the same time, some of them see fit for a manager to use the mild or even the extreme authoritarian style in dealing with a crisis situation or inadequate performance. This suggests that managers may use the participative or consultative style to reward cooperative and productive behavior and alternatively to employ the authoritarian style to discourage employees from engaging in unproductive or generally unacceptable behavior.

It is also interesting to note that no strong preference emerged when respondents were asked to indicate the appropriate style for dealing with ordinary situations or average mediocre subordinates. Iraqi managers were more willing than Saudi Arabian managers to use the participative style and less inclined to use the extreme authoritarian style. However, since the conditions of randomness and representativeness are not satisfied in this research sample, it is not permissible to ascribe these variations to national differences. For the same reasons these findings can not be generalized to other Arab countries. Another

limitation of this research is the simplistic and one-dimensional nature of cases or situations with which respondents were presented. In real-life organization, situations are intricate and multi-dimensional and the manager's responses to them are also complex.

In conclusion, the culture-bound hypothesis regarding the style of Arab managers has not been supported by this research findings. These findings are also inconsistent with previous results reporting a predominantely authoritarian or consultative style adopted by Arab managers. It has been found that Arab managers surveyed here, like their counterparts elsewhere, use a number of styles and their choice of style depends on their evaluation of the situation. Furthermore, most of them are aware of the motivational advantages of the participative and consultative styles and the inhibiting effect of the extreme authoritarian style but they are willing to use the latter as a corrective measure. Finally, more research is obviously needed to achieve a better understanding of the attitudes and behavior of Arab managers.

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TABLE 1

Management Style of Iraqi and

Saudi Arabian Managers (in Percentages)

	Management Style				
	Extreme Authoritarian	Mild Authoritarian	Consultative	Participative	x^2
Style of manager's superior					
1.Most advantageous to manager's interests					
Iraqi	2.49	20.14	28.8	48.57	4.64 n.s.
Saudi	3.00	18.47	33.11	45.42	
Total	2.63	19.68	29.97	47.71	
2.Most detrimental to manager's interest					
Iraqi	75.6	10.95	8.34	5.11	1.16 n.s.
Saudi	75.32	9.74	8.44	6.49	
Total	75.53	10.65	8.37	5.44	
Manager's style in running own unit					
3.Under favorable conditions					
Iraqi	7.48	20.82	27.64	44.01	3.006 n.s.
Saudi	7.95	23.86	30.3	37.88	
Total	7.6	21.68	28.36	42.34	
4.Under unfavorable conditions					
Iraqi	27.57	22.13	21.89	28.42	5.56 n.s.
Saudi	33.76	21.86	21.54	22.83	
Total	29.26	22.06	21.79	26.89	
Under ordinary conditions					
Iraqi	14.71	24.71	27.39	33.15	13.286 p).01
Saudi	19.6	28.63	26.21	25.55	
Total	15.99	25.76	27.08	31.17	

TABLE 1 - Continued

	Management Style				
	Extreme Authoritarian	Mild Authoritarian	Consultative	Participative	X^2
Manager's style in dealing with subordinates					
6. Adjusted and high performers					
Iraqi	4.37	14.93	32.49	48.21	
Saudi	2.8	15.42	31.78	50.00	4.505 ns.
Total	3.94	15.06	32.29	48.7	
7.Unadjusted and low performers					
Iraqi	34.65	31.56	20.14	13.65	
Saudi	33.16	35.79	18.95	12.11	3.578 n. .s.
Total	34.24	32.71	19.82	13.23	
8.Average subordinates					
Iraqi	10.96	35.92	29.54	23.99	
Saudi	15.53	39.02	30.68	14.77	11.612 p).01
Total	12.18	36.75	29.54	21.52	